Watching Television in Australia:
A Story of Innocence and Experience

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Abstract
The excitement and naiveté of early viewers have become central to narratives of the Australian viewing past. These stories are of simpler times when the pleasure of watching television was unmediated by modern self-consciousness and cynicism. This popular way of 'remembering' television seems both natural and inevitable, but its role as a discursive strategy is highlighted by the alacrity with which TV columnists sought to bestow a sense of experience on fledgling Sydney viewers. In this paper, I focus on the way that the regular TV column worked to stitch readers into the daily business of television. Moreover, from the beginning of regular broadcasting, TV columnists challenged the idea that watching television was an identity-subsuming process and invited their readers to assume an active connection with television and its culture.

Keywords: Audiences, Australian Television, Everyday Life, TV Columns

Introduction

The construction of television viewing history as progressive or developmental is not peculiar to the Australian context but, in the Australian situation, the popular association of early television with the fifties has allowed it and its audience to be collapsed into the 'fifties story'. Imagined simultaneously as a time of innocence and a period of narrow-mindedness, the dominant narrative of Australia in the fifties involves a perception of a simple and insular people readily committing to family life in the suburbs (White 1983). This monochromatic understanding of suburban life in fifties Australia has effortlessly intersected with a similarly tidy conception of the relationship of early TV viewers to the new technology of television. In this discussion, I compare the popular mode of recollecting past viewing practices with some of the ways that viewers of the fifties were invited to imagine themselves in relation to the developing TV service. The focus of my project is the daily minutiae of the Sydney press's negotiation of television as a new and distinctive broadcast medium. In reconstructing some of the key TV-centred narratives circulating during the establishment period of Australian television, I

have been surprised by the dispatch with which television was incorporated into the everyday. Whatever may have been happening in people's lounge-rooms at the time, in the public domain it did not take long for upbeat stories of TV's power to enthral to be discarded for a more considered conception of viewer engagement.

For this study of the first years of Sydney television broadcasting (1956-1958), I am drawing on the method of textual analysis used by Lynn Spigel in *Make Room for TV,* her classic history of the establishment of television as a medium of family entertainment in the United States. Concentrating on the period 1948-1955, Spigel sourced a variety of popular media representations in order to reconstitute the 'intertextual context…through which people might have made sense of television and its place in everyday life (1992, 2)'. The cultural history she has produced from this approach works not to 'reveal' the past but to foreground the conventions and discursive rules which organised the popular representation of television. Employing a similar approach, I am tracking the representation and construction of the 'idea' of the local viewer in the popular print media during the pioneering period of television in Australia. Yet, according to the terms of Spigel's investigation, the discursive negotiation of television may be understood as part of a shared and continuous national history, while my focus on Sydney (the first city to receive regular broadcasts) emphasises the initial fragmentary nature of the story of Australian television. Moreover, although Spigel draws attention to the cross-promotional connections between the women's magazines of her study and the US television industry, I am dealing with a media landscape defined by the concentration of its commercial interests.

By focusing on the role of the Sydney daily press and the iconic and influential *The Australian Women's Weekly* in the discursive negotiation of television's introduction, I foreground the 'managed' nature of the press representation of television and of the sense-making narratives produced in response to the new television service. At the same time, in the course of highlighting the singular configuration of media interests in Sydney during the period of my study, I seek to identify the various ways these interests were produced and mediated in relation to a projected readership. These popular publications curtailed the celebratory, carnivalesque potential of television so that in the public realm (whatever may have been the level of private excitement over the new TV set) television moved quite quickly into the 'everyday'. In pointing to the alacrity with which television's novelty-value was relinquished and replaced with a discourse of familiarity and restraint, I do not suggest that this defined the relationship of the viewers with television. Rather, as Spigel argues:

> We should remember that these popular representations of television do not
> directly reflect the public's response to the new medium. Instead, they begin

to reveal a general set of discursive rules that were formed for thinking about television in its early period (1992, 8-9).

Some Background

In Australia, television's reputation as a dangerous and disruptive influence on prevailing cultural and social standards was firmly in place well before a date had been set for its Australian introduction. Accounts from the United States of the enthusiasm with which television had been taken up and the changes it had wrought were more than sufficient to give rise to fears about its potential impact. Accordingly, the introduction of television into Australia was accompanied by numerous public expressions of anxiety (Curthoys 1991). After years of debate and hesitation, the Menzies Government, after assuming power in December 1949, finally determined it was time to go ahead with television. [1] Once the decision had been made to introduce television, anxieties about its impact on Australian life tended to concentrate on the actual structure of the proposed television system and the amount of space, if any, to be given to commercial interests. It was, however, no great surprise that Menzies should have decided on the dual system (pioneered by the radio service) in which a government-financed national station would operate alongside one or more commercial stations (Curthoys 1991, 155, Griffen-Foley 1999, 211-2). [2]

When television was finally introduced, it was done very gradually, with the two major population centres of Melbourne and Sydney being the first to be offered a service. Two commercial licences were issued in each city, and the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) was to offer an alternative service free of commercial interest. Accordingly, by the beginning of 1957, viewers in each city had a choice of three stations. In Sydney, TCN-9 decided to take the lead and began test broadcasts in July 1956 and, with much fanfare, began broadcasting a regular evening program on the 16th of September, 1956. Over the next few months TCN-9 was joined in Sydney by the 'national' station, ABN-2, and, then, by its commercial competitor, ATN-7. In Melbourne, the commercial station, HSV-7, was the first station to open officially, with the other national station, ABV-2, following soon after. GTV-9 had offered a special service during the Melbourne Olympics but began regular programming after its official opening in January 1957.

I have argued elsewhere that TCN-9 and its print media affiliate, Consolidated Press, worked purposefully to place the Sydney station and, subsequently, the Nine Network at the forefront of Australian TV-viewing history (Bye 2006). However, in this discussion, I am interested in this process of corporate myth-making only in so far as it intersects with the strategic construction of a particular story of Australia's TV past. According to this narrative, early television viewers are

'remembered' as simple folk yet to be burdened by the responsibility of discrimination or tarnished by experience and sophistication. Pyjama-clad crowds watching TV in shop windows, neighbours crammed into lounge-rooms and viewers mesmerized by test patterns or even 'snow' have become an integral part of the public story of Australian TV, as well as informing many individual viewing histories. These memories are pivotal to an 'Australian Television Story' in which present knowledge is contrasted with past naiveté.

The construction of television viewing history as progressive or developmental in the way that I have described is probably not peculiar to the Australian context. It is interesting, nevertheless, that the early days of American television are often remembered as a Golden Age of live television destroyed by networking and the onslaught of filmed material from Hollywood (Boddy 1990). Tim O'Sullivan (1991) has observed that the idea of community viewing is integral to many British memories of early television (1950-65). However, the memories his interviewees have of watching TV in a crowded living room or department store have none of the affective resonance that similar experiences have accrued in the Australian context. In fact, O'Sullivan's interviewees recollect their past viewing practices as pragmatic and controlled, so that 'unplanned and extensive amounts of time' in front of the TV were avoided: 'For many, television is remembered as having had a much lower priority on an agenda that encompassed more outgoing social and leisure pursuits and more demands associated with household maintenance and family work' (1991, 169). One can speculate about British testimonies of unstinting self-regulation and whether they form a discursive continuum with the austere and cautious beginnings of the British television service. In contrast, in the context of Australian popular memory, the excesses of early viewing practices are recalled as part of an evolutionary process of viewing where viewers resist the influence of mass culture, not by discipline, but by the critical distance that comes with familiarity.

The Print Media Context
In both Sydney and Melbourne, TV licences were granted to powerful media players, and print media interests were well-represented in both cities. However, I have chosen to concentrate on the Sydney mediascape, because the particular configuration of press and television interests in Sydney was more 'textured' than in Melbourne during the same period. Each Melbourne daily had its own niche market (once the *Argus* had closed in January 1957), but the daily newspaper market in Sydney was fiercely competitive. The circulation figures for both the morning and evening papers were neck and neck (Mayer 1964, 37), while the evening papers, always in fierce competition for retail advertising, were anxiously awaiting the expected impact of TV on their slice of the advertising market (Griffen-Foley 1999, 241). When television did arrive, it added a further intensity

to the often bitter rivalry between the various newspaper interests. Of the three companies dominating the Sydney market, two were given a sizeable piece of the television pie, while one missed out entirely. Consolidated Press, which published the morning tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*, and the extraordinarily successful magazine, *The Australian Women's Weekly*, had a controlling share in the commercial television station, TCN-9. Fairfax, publisher of morning broadsheet, *The Sydney Morning Herald,* and the evening tabloid, *The Sun*, had made a significant investment in the other commercial TV station, ATN-7. Truth and Sportsman, the publisher of the other evening tabloid, the *Daily Mirror,* had applied unsuccessfully for a TV licence and its owner, Ezra Norton, was left without an interest in any of the emerging television companies.

As the *Telegraph* told it, the story of TCN-9 was the story of Australian television. Yet, none of the *Telegraph's* newspaper competitors chose to present this particular broadcast as front-page news, demonstrating that alternative television histories were possible and, for a variety of reasons, expedient. TCN-9 and its print media partners represented the 'advent' of television in carnivalesque terms, inviting actual and potential viewers to conceive of television as momentous, an escape from routine. The opening night (one of many) was constituted as a major public event, bringing the Sydney community together in town and church halls, pubs and hospitals, so it was remarkable that the *Telegraph* was the only newspaper to cover the story. The *Telegraph,* nevertheless, made up for the reticence of its competitors with the verve of its coverage. Not only was the arrival of television front page news, it stretched to fill many more pages and continued over some days. On the day after the celebrated beginning of regular broadcasting, the paper proclaimed that 100,000 people had crowded around the available TV sets in order to watch the evening's program (17 September 1956, 1). Moreover, an avalanche of positive comments from a wide range of ordinary viewers worked to build up the impression of a special occasion shared and enjoyed (Ibid.). However, this moment of collective excitement and novelty necessarily had a limited life and inevitably prepared the way for a next stage, where television would become part of the rhythm of everyday life. Even by the time TCN-9's rival commercial station ATN-7 began broadcasting, there was a certain recognition that Sydney's big TV occasion was over. While ATN-7's newspaper affiliate, *The Sydney Morning Herald,* boasted of crowds and opening night excitement when reporting on ATN-7's official debut on 2 December 1956 (3 December 1956, 1,5), these boasts could in no way compare with the triumphant claims made on TCN-9's behalf by the *Telegraph.*

All of these responses were informed by the political and commercial biases influencing television's incorporation into a particular newspaper. Each newspaper negotiated the 'arrival' of television with respect to a complicated system of give and take, in which each paper's existing identity, its own financial interests and its

parent company's investment (or lack thereof) in television informed its representation of television during this early period. At the same time, it is remarkable, from within this range of responses to the introduction of television and in spite of the varying motivations and interests underpinning them, that all of the dailies should have been so prepared to contain the novelty of the new medium. Very quickly, the consensus was that it was business as usual. Nevertheless, while a sense of occasion was lost to TV, it was replaced by an alternative conception of a community of viewers defined by their mutual expertise. It was these viewers who were addressed by the TV columns that comprised the first regular coverage of television in the Sydney dailies (and *The Australian Women's Weekly*).

Talking Television: Incorporating Television into the Everyday

I began this study with the expectation that, during these first few years of television broadcasting in Sydney, the daily papers would have been replete with news about the new medium. Yet, despite the immediate and increasing popularity of the new television service, its newsworthiness was negotiated by the daily print media in line with the respective commercial interests at stake. According to this logic, the unaffiliated *Mirror* denied television any status as an historic event, generally limiting its coverage to a weekly column. Of course, the *Mirror's* determination to keep television off its front page was exceptional; the other daily papers portrayed television's arrival as an event of public significance, like the Olympics or a royal visit. However, television's construction as an occasion to be celebrated was complicated by the conflicting nature of the television histories produced by the newspapers on behalf of their respective TV affiliates. For the *Telegraph,* TCN-9 was at the forefront of Australian television history, while for the *Herald* and the *Sun*, the moment to be celebrated was the belated opening night of ATN-7. [3] Moreover, with none of the closure of the typical event, television had to be resignified in terms of the routines of everyday domestic life. Even the iconic *Telegraph*-generated and TCN-centred 'Story of Australian Television' was quick to achieve the kind of mythical status that consigned it to the past. This riveting story of a nation thrilled and united by the advent of television promptly became a signifier of an earlier stage of development – even in the pages of the *Telegraph.*

Eschewing the discursive ambivalence identified by Spigel in her study of the establishment of TV in the United States, the popular print media in Sydney quickly moved past television's capacity to thrill and disrupt, replacing novelty with a precocious assumption of viewer-centred experience. By attaching TV to the quotidian, the weekly newspaper column was an invaluable tool for mediating the practice of watching television for fledgling Sydney viewers. As a general rule, the TV columnists challenged the idea that watching television was an identity-subsuming process, and their readers were invited to assume an active connection

with television and its culture. Readers were encouraged to conceive of their viewing selves as sophisticated and self-possessed, even when the content of their viewing was condemned. The 'newness' of television was not offered as a novelty but as an opportunity for impatience, practical criticism, some keenness and the more-than-occasional laugh when it all went horribly wrong. The television service may have been new, as was the experience of viewing, but the columnists and their readers were experienced judges of what did, or did not, constitute worthwhile entertainment.

'TViewing' with Alexander Macdonald

When Alexander Macdonald launched his 'TViewing' column in the *Telegraph,* he distanced himself from the celebratory fervour that had marked the *Telegraph's* treatment of the beginning of regular broadcasting. Rather, in his introductory comments, he portrayed himself as a reluctant viewer: 'it is not my idea of fun to spend long evenings contemplating the calculated workings of the human face (15 March 1957, 13)'. Emphasizing the bold independence of his TV choices, Macdonald offered his critical opinion as a rebuttal of the public anxiety about TV's potential effects. Moreover, while his concern to establish his invulnerability was built on a fairly well-developed persona of a straight-talking original, he presupposed a similar viewing stance on the part of his regular readership. He and his readers were TV grown-ups who knew what they wanted from their TV service and required that service to meet their needs. Within these terms, the developing local industry was regarded with impatience for making amateurish TV: Robert Kennedy's constant interruptions on TCN's *What's My Line* made his guests look like a parade of performing gold fish (15 March 1957, 13); the loud-mouthed Jack Davey and Bob Dyer (both from ATN) were likened (at some length) to fossilised dinosaurs (28 June 1957,12); the management at ATN were entreated to 'stop combing the Chamber of horrors for its *Sydney Tonight* guest stars (19 July 1957,14)'; and a spear-gun was yearned for at the sight of ATN's lugubrious Professor Browne (4 April 1958, 2).[4] Macdonald's confident, even arrogant, opinions functioned simultaneously as a performance and a contribution to Sydney's conversation about television.

Macdonald was convinced that an enforced increase in local production would lead to a deterioration of the general standard of Sydney television entertainment: 'In short, they want to make shoddiness legal (4 October 1957, 27).' Macdonald efficiently 'dealt with' the nationalist and cultural concerns generated by an increase in imported programs by suggesting that the push for local programs bolstered an increasingly bemoaned national inferiority complex: 'Art does not carry a passport, and any local programme which would be recognised as a stinkeroo by the citizens of Chicago or London must not, in any circumstances, be excused or tolerated here, simply because it is homegrown (7 March 1958, 2).' His

personal penchant for a number of popular shows from Hollywood, as well as his impatience with the home-grown product, became in these terms a worthy refusal to lower the standard of the national culture or to accept the terms of the 'cultural cringe'. [5] By maintaining that imports stood between the nation's television culture and mediocrity, Macdonald was toeing the company line. Yet, while Frank Packer, Macdonald's vociferous employer (and chairman of TCN-9), considered the local production industry an expensive folly (Griffen-Foley 1999, 214-217; Bye 2006, 165), Macdonald simply argued for the viewer's right to be dissatisfied with second-rate TV shows, not for the obliteration of the local production industry.

It could be argued that Macdonald's column was propelled by its refusal to accept the inadequacies of the new television service and that, while he could be dismissive of those imported programs that failed to please, he reserved his most vitriolic criticism for inferior local offerings. Yet, although locally produced programmes were most often in his sights, Macdonald rarely dismissed Sydney-produced programmes or performers out of hand, and a key part of his role as a reviewer was the practice of returning regularly to local programmes to see how they were going. Changes were often registered, in most cases for the better. Keith Walshe, who appeared each weeknight at the helm of ATN-7's *Sydney Tonight* variety show, was complimented by Macdonald for having achieved 'a semblance of semi-exhausted relaxation (15 March 1957, 13)'. Some months later, Walshe looked 'like a man who no longer gives a damn' which meant, Macdonald elaborated, that he had conquered the TV performer's 'first and biggest handicap (11 November 1957, 31).' These periodic reviews created a sense of continuity in Macdonald's criticism, which in turn reinforced the understanding that he and his readers (and fellow viewers) were united by their viewing history and in their taste for an understated performance style.

Suspicious of grins, smirks, jerks, nervousness or enthusiasm, Sydney viewers, as presented by Macdonald, were impatient types, who could be expected to have little time for any unnecessary 'business' or amateurish fuss: 'in television, brevity is the soul of entertainment (6 December 1957, 32)'. Macdonald conceived the preference for a relaxed and uncomplicated mode of television entertainment as evidence of his own and his readers' sophisticated taste. With this in mind, he argued that Sydney viewers were actively reshaping their television service according to their own design, and a local content quota would interfere with the legitimate process by which viewers demanded and eventually achieved the kind of television they wanted to watch (4 October 1957, 27). Commenting the following year on an improved TV schedule, he argued that 'the viewers themselves inevitably resolve their own entertainment in the long run (30 May 1958, 14)'. He had previously avowed that Melbourne viewers were similarly influential: their parochial solemnity had produced a numbingly boring service (2 August 1957, 12).

The entertainment presented to British viewers was also evidence that audiences got the kind of television they deserved. Macdonald got British viewers in his sights, after coming across a warning issued in *The Lancet* to British viewers of the risk of deep vein thrombosis resulting from over-long periods of inactivity in front of the television. He considered this warning evidence of a highly developed boredom threshold, a national genius for dullness that enabled a passive acceptance of boring television. He shared with his readers his vision of 'the brave little Briton settling down to a nightly marathon endurance test, taking a short, trotting walk every 60 minutes, then returning to the hot seat for a further bout of Man versus Machine (13 December 1957, 30)'.

He balanced this British capacity to endure TV against all odds with the Australian (read Sydney) viewers' restless, dial-twiddling fretfulness. Acknowledging that the impatient viewing style of local viewers militated against their appreciative consumption of the 'worthier works of art', Macdonald pointed out that it also made them highly critical of the 'third-rate'. Not having 'the capacity for boredom enjoyed by the average Englishman, or even the average American,' 'Australian' viewers had demanded a vitality and energy from their new television service which, after only a short time, produced 'a pace of entertainment far brisker and much less tedious than that provided overseas.' Thanks to 'a chronically restless' local audience's constant demand to be entertained, the Sydney television service was well on the way to becoming exemplary of the proper function of television: 'which is essentially brief and diverting entertainment and not a gruelling administration of ponderous culture' (Ibid.).

Jeremy O'Brien and 'Look at TV'
In a rather unexpected move, the *Mirror* renamed its weekly radio column 'Radio-TV Roundup' on 15 August 1956, about a month before regular broadcasting began. This was an interesting strategy on the part of the only Sydney daily newspaper without TV connections. Although there was little TV news to include at this time, the publishers of the *Mirror,* by making this change, might well have been indicating a specific determination to represent the interests of the viewing audience. Certainly, when Jeremy O'Brien took over the column from 'N.K.' in June 1957, he presented his role in the terms of an obligation to his readers to help them get the most out of the service. In the event, O'Brien did not find a great deal to be excited about in the developing service. Even in his introductory column he delivered a blistering attack on local performers. In the process, he made his position clear: 'This column plugs talent. But it's got to be talent (19 June 1957, 26).'

O'Brien's general critical demeanour tended to be one of disappointment and frustration. As he surveyed the world of Sydney television, he saw a plethora of

inane and culturally unsympathetic American shows, a dwindling supply of poorly produced local material, too many repeats and a batch of ludicrous old films. It is of course no accident that this level of disillusionment should have been expressed by the columnist writing for the only paper 'without a TV horse in [its] stable (Ibid.)'. At the same time, in terms of the particular argument I am mounting, it is noteworthy that O'Brien never adopted the critical stance of a lone voice in the wilderness. On the contrary, he offered himself as an intermediary between a blinkered television service and the ill-served home viewer. The column was a conduit for the public expression of various private frustrations about the way the new service was developing: 'A number of viewers' petitions have been signed, demanding that [Eric Baume] be returned to his original hour (3 July 1957, 19).' Similarly, in mentioning the disappearance of *The Burns and Allen Show* from ATN, he highlighted the disappointment felt by a number of female viewers at the loss of one of the few prime time programs with a particular appeal for women: 'One lady in complaining put her finger on the awful truth that unless you are a very unusual lady indeed, there's nowt for you on Channel 7 on Wednesdays after 4.45 pm (16 December 1958, 19).'

O'Brien did not consider himself to be an eccentric or even a 'character' in the manner of Alexander Macdonald. Rather, he strove to represent ordinary viewers in what he understood to be their struggle against the blind ignorance of local television producers and broadcasters. Despite his recurrent expression of dissatisfaction and frustration with the way Sydney television was shaping up, he was careful not to demean the viewing tastes and choices of his readers. He had no interest in adopting a role of critical or cultural superiority. Indeed, by generally mistaking his own responses to television for those of his community of readers, O'Brien was able to construct the Sydney television industry as either hopelessly out of touch or else wilfully denying viewers their entertainment rights. For instance, O'Brien considered that he was speaking for his fellow countrymen forced to endure the embarrassment of Lucy's pregnancy, when he advised TCN-9 to drop the offending episodes of (the enormously popular) *I Love Lucy* from their schedule: 'the best thing that could happen would be to forget all about the present embarrassing situation, which both from a pictorial and situation viewpoint, is beginning to be grossly offensive to Australian tastes (25 February 1958, 28)'.

According to O'Brien, people in the television industry knew far less about good television than the disenchanted viewers who had to watch the substandard TV product they peddled (17 July 1957, 17). The local production industry was presented as an inward-looking world, unresponsive to the growing sophistication of its audience. Moreover, this insularity was not just the product of ineptitude but of apathy and even contempt:

> If commercial TV policy is to produce local shows which Blind Freddie can see are hopeless, and then, when they flop, replace them with imported stuff on the basis that Australians have had their chance and failed, then sooner or later there will have to be an accounting (18 September 1957, 33).

Instead, the opinions expressed by viewers in their letters were an indication that they had a better understanding of 'balanced entertainment than some of the people providing the TV programmes (23 September 1958, 22).'

O'Brien's columns were by no means dominated by references to the correspondence he received from his readers about their own experiences as viewers. However, such moments, when they occurred, were highlights and certainly created the impression that the column had successfully tapped into a ready supply of simmering viewer impatience. O'Brien's affinity with the perspective of the dissatisfied viewer was demonstrated by his sharing of the conventional viewer distrust of the operations of the ratings:

> What the public wants to know about these ratings surveys is firstly, how many of Sydney's 150,000 TV set owners are interviewed to obtain the figures. I've had a set from a comparatively early date. I've never been called upon or phoned, and I don't know anybody who has. (8 July 1958, 28)

It appeared that the column was the one place where the chasm between viewers' actual experience of television and the blinkered TV industry could be bridged. After requesting that readers write in with a list of their favourite TV shows, O'Brien was both overwhelmed by the success of his invitation (readers were more than eager to record their preferences) and captivated by the range of this informal register of local viewing preferences:

> Both the top 12 and the wide variety of shows right behind them seems to me to prove that the Australian audience is a highly individual audience, which won't be regimented in any one pattern of viewing (7 October 1958, 34).

Although tabulating the preferred shows in order of popularity as well as communicating various concerns or opinions that readers shared, O'Brien regarded the exercise as a readers' forum rather than a survey or poll. He specifically shunned comparison with 'the survey people' in order to offer the variety of opinion as evidence of the diverse and unquantifiable tastes of local viewers. In the process of asserting the superior integrity of this 1958 collection of 'wild viewers (Ang 1991, 36)', O'Brien endowed his column with a vision of the local television scene that he considered unavailable to the decision-makers in the television industry.

Becoming an Australian Television viewer in the *Weekly*

My reading of the response of *The Australian Women's Weekly* to the new television service may seem like an addendum to the previous discussion of the daily print media, but such a perception belies the key position this magazine occupied in the Australian cultural and media landscape of the fifties. While the *Weekly* was a pivotal part of the Consolidated Press operation, its commercial success and unprecedented popularity gave it a momentum and personality of its own. [6] The magazine was resolutely national and nationalist, working to represent a diversity of urban and rural experience in terms of its Australianness. When embarking on this study, I anticipated finding a cornucopia of TV-centred material in the magazine, particularly in view of Spigel's work on the representation of television in American women's magazines (1992), but the *Weekly's* response to television was curiously restrained. Notwithstanding its Consolidated Press pedigree, the magazine did not get particularly caught up in the excitement of television. Moreover, despite its commitment to the family and the 'Australian way of life (Sheridan 2000)', the *Weekly* rarely lingered on any of the social and cultural concerns about television which were in circulation at the time.

The status of the *Weekly* as a national publication limited its capacity to ascribe the same kind of significance to the opening of TCN-9 as did *the Telegraph*, the magazine's Consolidated Press stable-mate. In the context of the nationally published *Weekly,* any interpretation of TCN-9's opening as a historic broadcasting triumph carried the danger of alienating many more readers than it included. In his popular history of the magazine, Denis O'Brien suggested that the arrival of television functioned in the magazine as a nation-building event like the Olympics or a Davis Cup victory (1982, 115). However, my perception of the *Weekly's* treatment of television during this very early period of broadcasting is that remarkably few efforts were made to construct television in these terms. Television was produced in the Sydney edition of the magazine as a local story by means of a regular TV column that first appeared in November 1956. (The Melbourne edition did not incorporate a column until November 1958, presumably because Consolidated Press did not have a commercial interest in the Melbourne TV industry.)

Although the owner's son, Clyde Packer, initially wrote the column, by March 1957, Nan Musgrove had taken over and, with the occasional contribution from the exuberant Cynthia Strachan, it became characterised by the informality and inclusiveness of its address. Definitely more upbeat than either of the newspaper columnists I have discussed, the *Weekly* columnists were intrigued by television and assumed a similar fascination on the part of their readers. However, this collective enthusiasm was understood as constructive and purposeful. Conceiving of their readers as fellow enthusiasts, the columnists established a rapport that encouraged correspondence and the sharing of opinions. The exclusive focus on the fledgling

Sydney television industry was integral to this conception of growing knowledge and collectively accumulated expertise. In fact, the edges between production and consumption became quite blurry, not only because the columnists took their readers behind the scenes, but also because of the emphasis on the 'ordinariness' and inexperience of the people working in television.

Even before broadcasting began, the magazine's readers had been addressed as part of the nascent television community (not just as consumers of mass entertainment). A 1955 article, 'Television is Nearly Here', not only dealt with interior design issues and scheduling, but also detailed the number of lines on the Australian screen (625), the height of the TCN transmitter (820 feet) and procedures for training and recruitment (17 August, 1955, 20). In an item written just prior to the beginning of regular transmission, expressions such as 'rotate the yoke', 'blizzard head' and 'womp' were decoded in case a reader 'should ever enter a television studio or associate with someone in the industry (5 September 1956, 40)'. The columnists were able to build on this notion of connection by, for instance, recounting tales of ordinary people finding themselves, by chance, with a television career. One of these early stories involved an amateur golfer who impressed TCN-9's Bruce Gyngell at a party: 'Last week when TCN was looking for a commentator who knew something about golf, Bruce suddenly thought about Barry... (21 November 1956, 10).'

There was a feeling that anyone could be on television and, indeed, as Australian content primarily consisted of variety and participation shows and sport, substantial numbers of 'ordinary' folk either had their chance in front of the camera or found a seat in the ubiquitous studio audience. Moreover, not only was television offered as a great leveller in terms of its capacity to transform the lives of ordinary people, but it also exposed the 'ordinariness' of the famous. The television cameras cruelly revealed the baldness or middle-aged spread of 'stars' attempting to make the transition from radio. TV seemed to evaporate the broadcasting nonchalance of many of these established figures, and turned them back into rank amateurs. The pitfalls of TV performance were made clear in comments made by Nan Musgrove about the improved demeanour of radio star Jack Davey: 'He lost his snap-frozen look and occasionally, when he forgot the cameras, you'd catch a glimpse of the personality that made him famous (27 November 1957, 12).' The much-adored Queen Elizabeth was subject to the same TV challenges, and her rather rocky TV debut (on Canadian television) was described to readers with relish. Not only did she fail to hide her nervousness ('the jitters') but she also wore a dress with an unflattering 'deep plunge neckline' and sleeves that 'came out heavy' (30 October 1957, 10).

The columnists were able to use the intimacy and certainty of their magazine's general address to insert themselves enthusiastically into the 'everydayness' of

television. Sydney-produced television was considered community property and readers wrote in to the column to offer advice and request information. Television was something to be shared, in the home, in front of a shop window or inside the pages of *the Weekly*. Underpinned by the sense of rapport established by Nan Musgrove, and her occasional substitute, Cynthia Strachan, the column functioned as an enclave where readers were invited to imagine themselves at the forefront of this new medium. While *the Weekly* in its post-war formation may have worked to define and fix 'the woman's role' as that of wife and mother, the television column imbued the projected television viewer with none of the 'doily gentility' that Susan Sheridan locates in the *Weekly's* representations of women (1995, 96). In this privileged space in the magazine, television did not have to fulfil any conventionally productive function in the female reader's life, whereas, in general, the work involved in looking after a house, a family or one's appearance was central to *the Weekly's* portrayal of femininity. Cynthia Strachan was unashamedly gung-ho in her dismissal of the concerns expressed about the impact of television on the domestic life deemed sacred in much of the rest of the magazine. She celebrated TCN 9's first birthday by thumbing her nose at concerns about the social impact of television: 'And what if it does mean viewers have developed square eyeballs and haven't finished clearing out the top drawer? It's been fun, hasn't it (18 September 1957, 10)?'

Musgrove's column functioned as a genuine forum in which the concept of the armchair expert was given free rein. By encouraging her readers to contribute their ideas about the new television service to her column, Musgrove made the column a space where amateurs could imagine themselves to be just as knowledgeable about TV as the (newly fledged) professionals. Accordingly, when A. Conlon of Elizabeth Bay wrote to express her disapproval of the practice of looking into the camera while addressing someone in the studio, her advice to these 'lens hogs' was printed word for word:

> When you are addressing the audience, look at the audience. When you are talking to someone on the set, look at him and no one else. Viewers can do without the winning or manly smile you throw them every so often as you would throw a bone to a dog. The bone is, after all, a hambone. (15 May 1957, 10)

The irritation expressed by this viewer was in no way muted by the novelty of television. Moreover, in expressing her annoyance at the 'manly' smile, Conlon highlighted her position as an expert female viewer made impatient by amateurish male presenters.

During the early years of the column, the world of television production was never presented as impermeable or exclusive but was subject to a determined

egalitarianism. Musgrove was relentless in her determination that the inner workings of the TV studio should be accessible to her readers. It was in this vein that a column entitled 'Red is Dangerous… even on TV' dealt with the artistry required to create an impression of colour and texture within the television spectrum of black, white and seven shades of grey. This information about the trials of designing appropriate costumes for television addressed the reader directly as a potential television performer: 'If you are ever asked to appear on television, don't wear red. It is the most unpredictable of all colours when photographed on TV (4 September 1957, 10).' When a reader wrote in to share her concern about the filthy piano used in a televised concert that she had attended, Musgrove made some enquiries and discovered that the piano had been sprayed with 'TV goo' to prevent glare from the piano affecting the concert telecast (7 August 1957, 10). The discussion did not end here as another reader suggested that the old-fashioned practice of draping a shawl over the piano might be a simpler solution to the problem (21 August 1957, 12).

Musgrove conscientiously strove to short-circuit the notion that television viewers might be disarmed by, or overly susceptible to, the new medium. The column's effect was to represent the relationship between the magazine's readers and the new technology of television as active and critical without taking away any of the fun. Thus Musgrove commented that 'the viewer has the supreme weapon, the switch to another channel (10 July 1957, 10).' Moreover, not only was *the Weekly* involved in the process of creating a television culture for its vision of a typical Australian audience, it was also concerned to position its implied female reader at the centre of this culture. During these first years, with their emphasis on items of local interest, the columnists created a perception of television communality that stilled fears about welcoming an alien and intrusive technology into the family home. Eschewing glamour and celebrating the ordinary, even the banal, the columnists made television instantly familiar and accessible.

The television column was in certain respects a rite of passage for its readers. While the fact of the column itself can be interpreted as evidence of *the Weekly* hedging its bets, the expeditious institution of television in the NSW edition placed its implied female reader in the television vanguard. Of course, the fledgling television industry to which the readers were given the illusion of access was in reality a predominantly male world. However, television also accrues meaning in the domestic context, as part of the reception process. Consequently, by encouraging readers to consider themselves participants in the television process, the column reserved a place in the centre of the family circle for the female viewer who, by this time and in this context, could watch and enjoy television with impunity.

Conclusion

While the narratives of the past are the focal point of this discussion, their reconstruction is a response to certain conventions by which 'early Australian viewers' have been reconstituted within Australian popular memory. In the context of popular memory/shared nostalgia, television-viewing history is understood, almost as a matter of course, in teleological terms. It is taken for granted that Australian viewers of the present watch television in a more sophisticated way than they used to. Concerns about the cultural impact of 'lowbrow' commercial television culture may persist, but there is an alternative perspective in which 'modern' viewers' acquaintance with television functions as an antidote to any excessive identification with the medium:

> Like people from other developed, industrialised countries which have had TV for three to four decades, we have come to take television's existence for granted and no longer relate to it with awe and excitement. We have become 'wild' viewers: watching and using television in ways that suit us rather than passively submitting to the authoritarian regimes of network scheduling and programming… (Ang 1991, 36)

In contrast, according to this viewing formula, early viewers, for whom television was an innovation and a novelty, were unprotected from the excesses commonly associated with television.

> TV was a device so fundamental to the moment's simultaneously evolving notions of the suburban idyll that families readily submitted every evening to an externally planned sequence of numbingly trivial events, each calculated to enrapture, fascinate, capture and hold (Green, *Age* 24 June 2006, 11).

In researching the response of the Sydney popular press to the establishment of television in Australia, I have produced a series of close-readings that complicate both the dominant story of 'early Australian television' and the conventional opposition between past and present viewers. The mythology is that early TV viewers consumed their primitive television fare with uncritical and naïve avidity, an over-connection to the TV product that is to be contrasted with the distance that comes with experience. I have not sought to replace these motivated 'memories' with a more truthful and specific vision of early viewers in Sydney, but to examine these memories in the light of the representations and identifications made available in the popular media of the time. With these parameters in mind, the unexpectedly contained quality of the greeting given to television in the Sydney popular press has been a focal point of this investigation. Not only was the celebration of the new service partisan, partial and intermittent, it was also short-lived: excitement and novelty were promptly swapped for the authority wrought by familiarity, particularly in the conversational space of the TV column. In attaching

TV to the routines of everyday life, these early viewing discourses constructed viewers as always already modern.

Notes

[1] Menzies was leader of the (conservative) Liberal Party and formed a government in coalition with the Country Party. The Labor Party had been considering excluding commercial interests from the Australian television service. See Curthoys (1991).

[2] To counter Australian concerns about the commercial excesses of American culture, the introduction of commercial television in Britain was offered by the *Telegraph* to support its own commercial TV interests: 'Not for it (ITA) the nice guaranteed income that goes on just the same whether you are doing your job or not, whether you are satisfying the public or making them fed up (22 August 1956, 28).'

[3] The conflict over the key moment in Sydney television history not only points to the powerful sway of political and commercial interests in the Sydney press's representation of television but is also a reminder that the introduction of television into Australia was a process, not a moment (Moran 1991).

[4] Except for *Professor Browne's Study* which was made in Melbourne, these were all Sydney produced shows.

[5] Nationalist historian A. A. Phillips (1958) coined the term 'cultural cringe' to describe the Australian tendency to seek cultural inspiration and endorsement from 'somewhere else'. The enthusiasm with which this term was taken up is a fair indication of the increasing dominance of alternative discourses.

[6] In the fifties the *Weekly* had the highest circulation per capita of any women's magazine in the world and was read in one in four Australian homes each week (Sheridan 2002, 1).

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